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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 29, 2013

CANDĀ THERĪ

written by U Thein Zan

Introduction

At 1971 AD, the writer U Thein Zan read some interesting news when he was at Bago. The female hermits held alms-bowls in their hands and went for alms-round. This was an interesting thing in the Buddha's dispensation. From that time onwards, he started to study the life of the Buddhist women and later collected their stories.

Later he published a book written in Burmese called "The Arahant bhikkhunis and women". In that book, he wrote a story on the life of Candā Therī.

This is the translated English version of that story. This translation is group project undertaken by Aggācāra Dhamma Distribution group. Our sincere wish is to spread Dhamma to the whole world by translating worthy books and Dhamma talks into English. Our translated books are distributed freely. We like to express our gratitude to those who join in the translation, editing and contributing to the printing fund.

Candā Therī

This was the time when the Gotama Buddha became enlightened in the three worlds of sensual pleasure, fine-material and immaterial world. There was a rich couple who lived at a Brahmin village that was quite far from Sāvattihī, They did not have any children, so they really wished for a son or daughter.

As soon as the wife became pregnant, their riches started to dwindle. Actually, they were very happy at the prospect of getting children, but were not very happy due to their diminishing riches. When the wife gave birth to a girl who whose face was clear like silver moon, they were happy.

Therefore, she was named after Candā which means the moon. She became to grow up day by day. However at the same time, her family prosperity became decline. When she came of age, the parents became poor. Whether rich or poor, they had to marry off their daughter who had come to age. Just like a tree doesn't bear fruit when it is time, so also it would be a shameful thing for a girl who doesn't get married when comes of age.

Because her family is poor, the husband must be poor also. Even they are poor, she was happy. They stayed together with her parents and worked together to make a living.

Then, an infective disease broke out in her village. Day and night, it took the lives of the people and greatly tortured the whole village. It was called ahivata epidemic. When someone was infected, he got a high fever and became delirious from high fever and his life was destroyed. After many years in the later time, it was called plague.

The infection to others was very fast. When someone was sending the corpse to the cemetery, by the time he came back, he became unwell and lay on the bed. After lying down, he would never get up any more. All the villagers were in great fear and alarm. Those who were not infected by the disease ran away from the village in groups. Some even abandoned the infected sick ones and ran away for their lives.

Candā's family was thinking whether to run or not. Where to run to, how to make a living? They had to answer these questions. That's why they did not run suddenly. Even

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as they did not flee, the ahivata disease would not stay still. The family was inflected. Her parents and husband lay sick on the bed. She scurried around to take care of three sick persons.

One day, her father beckoned and spoke to her. "Daughter, don't just be content with taking care of us and be tired out. There is no escape way from this disease or able to overcome it" "Father, don't die yet. I will call the physician to cure you all." She replied with heart-rending sorrow. Her father said again. "The physician has run away to save his life. For our family lineage not to be terminated, please break a hole on the nearby wall and run away." "How can I leave you all, dear father!" She felt sorrow-stricken and cried.

"If you don't listen to my word, you will be infected with that disease and die. Our family lineage will be terminated. Please listen to your father." The father urged with weak indistinct voice. Her husband could not say anything, can only showed the hand gesture of driving her away.

Her family lived in an old house. Together with 20 poor families, about 100 people stayed here. However, while Candā and her father were talking together, corpse by corpse were being carried out. Even the hard-headed Candā cannot be stubborn any more. She felt frightened. There is only one entrance for people to come and go. To reach that entrance, she has to cross many sick people. So, she hit the near brick-wall, from the hole due to the fallen brick, she crawled on her stomach and fled.

The whole village was full of crows coming to eat the dead bodies. Only the loud sound of crying and lamentation of humans remained. The village where she has stayed for her whole life became a fearful place for her. She ran wherever her feet took her. Because of the words of parent and husband, "You run!", and she fled. The fear in her threatened her to run. In actual fact, her mind does not have any desire to run.

She did not know where to run to or who to approach for help. She has nowhere to go, no relative to seek for shelter, no security from the threat of the disease. She considered the place to go. She came to the village where the relative of her father stayed. But the villagers were no longer there. There remained some evidence of the village in the past but not a being lived there now. Then she went over to next three or four villages where her mother's birth place was. However, her mother's relatives have moved away to a place unknown for her. Candā, what to do?

Whatever happened, her stomach was hungry. At first, due to fear, she can let go a meal. With the force of fear still lingering on, she let go her second meal. There was still no problem. However, due to missing the third meal, the stomach could not stand the hunger anymore. Her only refuge is a bowl and a stick. The stick could drive away and frighten the dog which came to bite her. The bowl can be used to put any food that other people have discarded.

There was not even a day that poor Candā can satisfactorily eaten to her stomach full. Sometimes, there are many days she could not even get a lump of rice even after begging for the whole day. So, she moved to the next village. She begged with expectation to get square food. At that village, she moved along and begged with expectation to get plentiful of food.

When her stomach did not get enough, her body shape seemed to be no more. When there were the tears in the clothes, she used thorn to hold the clothes together. Day by day, her clothes became old with many tears, only pieces of cloth that cover shameful part remained.

She could not eat to her stomach full and this lasted for a long time. It had been seven years. She travelled from village to village. Looking for food, at last she came to Sāvathī city. When she saw many tiered roofs, rest-houses, moats, turret of a place hall, carrying

goods carts, horse and elephant chariots and people, her mind lifted up. She thought, “at this place that has this much prosperity, I can get enough food to fill my stomach.” However, her thoughts were wrong.

This Sāvattthī city was crowded with people and swarming with beggars. One day, one beggar who looked plump brought her some good news. “You should go to the nunnery of Paṭācārā bhikkhunī instead of walking in the city till your legs are tired out. There is plenty of food in her place.”

Even when he was saying that there was plenty of food, her saliva was oozing out. She went to the Paṭācārā nunnery. Near the nunnery, there was already an assembly of people waiting to receive the discarded food. At that time, the bhikkhunī Paṭācārā and her many disciples indeed were very much revered by people. The requisite like foods and so on were overflow.

The nuns had eaten the food inside the nunnery. So, the beggars were waiting to eat in expectation and began to stir in motion. Not long, four nuns came out from the nunnery compound, and put the food in the containers outside the nunnery. The beggars jostled and pushed to reach to front to get the food. They nudged each other with elbow and pushed with hands. The stronger one kicked others, cursed and hit others also.

Even though Candā was very famished, she still could not compete with them. She came from good parents and had good lineage. That’s why, she was not able to hit and curse others. To torture others means without shame. She also could not stand other people are torturing her. So, she stayed dropping behind the crowd. She only took the food that others did not want in order to satisfy her pants of hunger.

This situation did not happen one or two days, but it occurs daily. She had no other better place, that’s why she always came to this place. At the back of the group of beggars, she always dropped behind and kept quiet.

“Devotee, please follow me to come inside our nunnery.” She stared at the bhikkhunī who talked to her. “Yes, devotee. Come please, young devotee, there is no danger for you.” From the shade of peaceful Dhamma which was that nunnery, with face and voice of that speaker who possessed the Dhamma, it was very peaceful and cooling. Placing trust in her, Candā followed her inside. The nunnery where the nuns were staying was big and magnificent. Surrounded by small and big trees and plants, it was very pleasing place to take a rest. Then, the other nuns surrounded both of them.

“Young devotee, please sit. We have seen you for four or five days already, you don’t push others away or rob the food as other beggars did. Why?” “My mind inclined to hiri-ottappa (shame of moral, fear of moral).” She answered to a nun’s answer.

“From where did you come and why did you come here?” “I came from Mahāgāma Brahmin village at the northern part. Due to the plague disease named Ahivata, I ran to here. It had been seven years that I had to beg for food. Not even one day that I can fill my stomach full.” Oh, what a pity, girl!”

Then, the nuns looked for food to feed her, but there was no food. All the remaining food of the lunch had been discarded away. However, the girls who did voluntary service had still some food. So, they shared the food with her. Then, she started to eat. The rice still looked like rice, and the dishes looked like dishes.

(Translator’s comment: what she had eaten for seven years was only discarded and disgusted remains of some food. The rice could not be differentiate from others).

For seven years, this was the first real food that she got. That’s why, she continuously to eat ravishingly without even lifting her head. On seeing this, the nuns who still not enlightened yet cried because of strong emotion of happiness. “She is a girl that comes from good family and has good looks. What a pity? What shall we do?”

The nuns sat quietly without answer. Finally, she was given bath and later was brought to see Paṭācārā bhikkhunī. The chief nun Paṭācārā listened her life story attentively. Then, she preached the Dhamma as followed.

“Dear daughter, the beings who are whirling up and down in the saṃsāra (rounds of rebirth and death) like the centipede crawling up and down in the circular rattan frame that placed under the water pot to support it. Then, the beings drown inside the ocean of saṃsāra. They cannot get happiness; only definitely and constantly meet with the big suffering which is compared to a thick and high mountain. They cannot get peacefulness and happiness at any time.”

Just by listening to the peaceful and compassionate voice, Candā’s heart automatically calm down and became peaceful. “Beings dwell in suffering, but still view the material things which are suffering as source of happiness. Without removing thirst and hunger, they slowly sink into the ocean of saṃsāra. Those who stay like this are not able to escape from the round of suffering, my dear Candā”

“Yes, venerable lady.”

“Now, the Buddha Sāsana (dispensation of the Buddha’s teaching) is shining. If you take refuge in the shade of the Buddha’s teaching, you will be able to escape from all round of suffering. Don’t you want to meditate and be a nun under my guidance?”

For Candā who had been tossed and turned in the torments of life for 7 years, there was no more attachment or parents. The husband who she loved in the past has become bones now. Who to attach now? How about her attachment to appearance? What is it matter now for she is now a beggar who never gets a full meal?

“Save me, venerable lady! May I take up the noble work of meditation to be free from the round of suffering. Please give me a chance to be a bhikkhunī.”

The poor Candā now who had become bhikkhunī started to practise noble training. With noble perfection, she followed well the admonishment from her preceptor. Then, she approached a quiet place to practice meditation. Due to meditating the noble Dhamma, and also with the support of her paramī (perfection) of past lives, soon she became an arahant, the holy one who has eliminated all mental defilements, together with four types of paṭisambhidā (analytical knowledge).

Candā Therī is a famous nun in the dispensation of the Buddha. When reflecting her past life, she uttered out her reflection as recorded in the Therī Udāna gāthā (utterance of female elder nuns).

Before, I was a suffering one,
no husband, no children,
no relatives, no friends,
cannot get enough clothing and food.
Taking a staff and bowl in hand,
begging for alms from house to house,
tortured by the cold & heat,
I wandered for seven years.

Having seen a bhikkhunī,
I obtained food and drink,
I approached her, I begged her:
"Let me go forth into homelessness."

Out of compassion,
Paṭācārā nun let me go forth;
advised me, urged me to reach the highest goal.

Hearing her words, I followed her advice.
Her advice was not in vain. I'm a cankers-free (arahant) with three wisdoms (vijjā).

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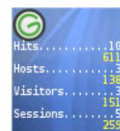
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